

20 April 2015

SLIMMING ONLINE

Being overweight is risky ... but so is slimming when people resort to dubious methods. In 2002 Jeremy Laurance, Health Editor of the Independent, gave a 'close to home' example of use of a banned 'slimming pill.' He said: "The adulterated Chinese medicine came to light after a 44-year-old woman in Southend-on-Sea, Essex, suffered palpitations, anxiety and high blood pressure on taking the slimming aid. Doctors who treated her found an "alarming number" of other women had attended the same Chinese herbalist for weight-loss remedies. Writing in the British Medical Journal, they say: "Most had been taking multiple preparations – as many as nine – and described spectacular results. Several reported considerable cardiovascular symptoms but were reassured that Chinese medicines are natural and can cause no harm."

So, what was the ingredient that was to blame? JL explains that: "Analysis of the 'traditional' remedy showed it contained fenfluramine, an appetite suppressant that was subject to a global ban in 1997 after it was linked with heart and lung problems in some patients. One 29-year-old woman died of pulmonary hypertension (high blood pressure in the lungs) 23 days after starting a course of fenfluramine."

In 2005 a BBC Radio Five Live reporter was, in addition to this banned drug, "also sold two other prescription-only drugs – Danthron - a specialist laxative which has cancer causing properties and is only recommended for use with terminally ill patients, and Sibutramine – prescribed in cases of extreme obesity." We were told that: "scores of traditional Chinese medicine stores are being investigated."

More recently we have been hearing about deaths linked to DNP, a pesticide which can be bought easily on line for use as a slimming aid. Ben Spencer and Matt Chorley reported for The Mail in 2013 on the death of bright and beautiful Sarah Houston. They said: "The parents of a medical student killed by a banned slimming pill said yesterday she had been the happiest they had ever known. Miss Houston had been secretly taking capsules of the drug, which is banned for human consumption but available online as it is used as a pesticide. It has been linked to 62 deaths worldwide."

This week there's a story by Alex Wellman in The Mirror about the demise of a "bright and bubbly" young woman. He reports: "Police have issued a warning after a woman died after taking tablets, believed to have been 'diet pills', bought over the internet. Tragic Eloise Aimee Parry went to Royal Shrewsbury Hospital after taking the pills and falling ill, but tragically the 21-year-old died on Sunday April 12. Although formal cause of death will be confirmed by the coroner at a later date, West Mercia Police have issued a warning to others of the dangers of buying substances online."

He quotes Chief Inspector Jennifer Mattinson who said: "Substances from unregistered websites could put your health at risk as they could be extremely harmful, out-of-date or fake." The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is also quoted in the article: "We advise the public not to take any tablets or powders containing DNP, as it is an industrial chemical and not fit for human consumption. It can be extremely dangerous to human health."

I've reported in the past on 'herbal' eczema treatments for use on children that are very effective – mainly because they contain dexamethasone, a potent steroid which can cause great harm when used inappropriately. You can also buy counterfeit "malaria prevention"

tablets that contain little or none of the active drug – thereby running the major risk that you will contract malignant (falciparum) malaria. The list is endless.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration warns of the possible dangers of buying medicines over the internet: “Buying prescription and over-the-counter drugs on the Internet from a company you don't know means you may not know exactly what you're getting. There are many websites that operate legally and offer convenience, privacy, and safeguards for purchasing medicines. But there are also many “rogue websites” that offer to sell potentially dangerous drugs that have not been checked for safety or effectiveness. Though a rogue site may look professional and legitimate, it could actually be an illegal operation. These rogue sites often sell unapproved drugs, drugs that contain the wrong active ingredient, drugs that may contain too much or too little of the active ingredient, or drugs that contain dangerous ingredients.

For example, FDA purchased and analysed several products that were represented online as Tamiflu (oseltamivir). One of the orders, which arrived in an unmarked envelope with a postmark from India, consisted of unlabelled, white tablets. When analysed by FDA, the tablets were found to contain talc and acetaminophen, but none of the active ingredient oseltamivir.

FDA also became aware of a number of people who placed orders over the Internet for one of the following products: Ambien (zolpidem tartrate), Xanax (alprazolam), Lexapro (escitalopram oxalate) and/or Ativan (lorazepam). Instead of receiving the drug they ordered, several customers received products containing what was identified as foreign versions of Haldol (haloperidol), a powerful anti-psychotic drug. As a result, these customers needed emergency medical treatment for symptoms such as difficulty in breathing, muscle spasms, and muscle stiffness – all problems that can occur with haloperidol.”

As well as putting your life/health at risk there is the ever present risk of breaches of confidentiality ... how do you know that the website will not sell your personal information to others?

For further information on the many scams and pitfalls Google: *NHS Dangers of buying your medicines online* – and – *Mail online – The dangers of dot.com drugs* – and, if relevant, search for – *Help Your Teen Avoid Dangerous Drugs Online*.

NHS FAT CATS

I thought when we got rid of 'Moneybags McKay' that we'd have seen an end to the Fat Cat Culture for a while. Laura Donnelly reported in The Telegraph in November 2012 that the former chief executive of Midlands and the East Strategic Health Authority (SHA) “is on a salary of £230,000, and will be able to take a lump sum of £1.01 million, most of which is tax-free. The senior administrator can combine £465,000 in redundancy with up to £549,000 cash from a £2.4 million pension pot.” I'm not able to check these figures ... all I know is that, whilst he didn't do much for my patients, he certainly knew how to look after himself!

You'd imagine that the wide coverage that this sort of behaviour attracts must surely deter others from feathering their own beds. Seemingly not ... Paul Bentley, Lucy Osborne and Katherine Faulkner report in the Mail: “Hospital bosses are today accused of ‘shamelessly milking the NHS’ by taking £35million in pay rises during the worst funding crisis in a

generation. Some executives earned more than £1million last year and even at hospitals with the worst standards of care directors enjoyed pay packages worth up to £5,000 a day. The figures can be revealed after the Daily Mail carried out the most comprehensive audit ever of trust accounts and the exploitation of the NHS pension scheme by senior executives. The extraordinary results are 'on the scale of the MPs' expenses scandal', says one influential Government adviser."

The same three journalists, writing in the same newspaper, have just come back with a postscript to the original story. They write: "NHS chiefs are using a potential tax dodge by channelling salaries of up to £2,000 a day through personal companies. Hospital bosses are exploiting cash-strapped trusts by raking in bumper pay deals as freelance consultants. And some are putting that inflated pay through personal service companies – which allows them to avoid paying income tax at source."

Some things never change. Let's put this behind us, though ... what of the future? After the impending election, whatever the outcome, it will be time to take stock. Surely it's reasonable to expect the fat cat managers (who give the hard working ones who aren't so greedy a bad name) to take some responsibility for their actions when they're being rewarded so handsomely? In my view they should be made fully accountable. A body something like 'the GMC for Managers' should be set up – so if they, for example, knowingly mislead the public – or intentionally put patients at risk (or fail to take adequate measures when others are doing so) – they should be publicly hauled over the coals and, where appropriate, 'struck off'.

Indeed I'd go further. If they recklessly waste money that should have been spent on patient care they should put their hands in their own pockets. Even if they only had to dip into their well-stocked bank accounts and fork out 0.25% of the cash they've poured down the drain it would make them think twice about wasting taxpayers' money on barmy ideas. Unless there are major changes we will again see the sort of abuses that have happened in this part of the world in recent years ... and, at worst, there may even be another Mid Staffs.

Dr John Cormack